ENTRY

Mills E. Godwin (1914–1999)

[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/293:
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Governor Mills E. Godwin

SUMMARY

Mills E. Godwin was the only governor of Virginia elected by the voters to two terms, serving as a **Democrat** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/democratic-party-of-virginia/] from 1966 to 1970 and as a **Republican** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/republican-party-of-virginia/] from 1974 to 1978. After playing a major legislative role in Virginia's resistance to **desegregation of the public schools** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/desegregation-in-public-schools/] in the 1950s, Godwin adopted more moderate positions as lieutenant governor from 1962 to 1966 and as candidate for governor in 1965. During his first term he was responsible for enactment of a sales tax and approval of the first significant statewide bond issue in the twentieth century. Godwin devoted the additional revenue to public education, mental health, and highways. The creation of the Virginia Community College System was one of Godwin's major accomplishments. He also appointed a commission to revise the **Constitution of**

1902

[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/constitutional-convention-virginia-1901-1902/]. Constitutionally ineligible to succeed himself, Godwin left office in 1970. Disillusioned by the growing influence of liberals in the Virginia Democratic Party, Godwin sought the governorship again as a Republican in 1973. He narrowly defeated Lieutenant Governor **Henry E. Howell** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/howell-henry-e-1920-1997/]. Godwin's second term coincided with an economic recession, energy shortages, and an environmental catastrophe. In a time of retrenchment his major initiatives were improvements to state prisons and a second bond issue approved in 1977.

Contributor: ***James R. Sweeney***
Contributor: ***the Dictionary of Virginia Biography***

Early Years

Mills Edwin Godwin was born in Nansemond County on November 19, 1914, and was the son of Mills Edwin Godwin and Otelia Margaret Darden Godwin. His father owned and operated a 500-acre farm on the north side of the Nansemond River. Godwin was always known as and signed his name Jr., even after the death of his father in 1946. Godwin attended public school in the nearby village of Chuckatuck, in Nansemond County, and matriculated at the College of William and Mary's new Norfolk Division (later Old Dominion University)

in 1931. The following year he transferred to the main campus in Williamsburg but left before earning a degree to study law at the University of Virginia. He graduated on June 10, 1940, and practiced law in the city of Suffolk. Godwin married Katherine Thomas Beale, a Chuckatuck school teacher, on October 26, 1940. During World War II (1939–1945) he served as a special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C., Saint Louis, Norfolk, and Richmond.

The General Assembly

Godwin resumed his law practice in Suffolk after the war. His involvement in numerous community organizations paved the way for his entry into politics. In the August 1947 Democratic Party primary he defeated Willis E. Cohoon, the incumbent member of the House of Delegates representing Nansemond County and Suffolk. Although his opponent was a member of the dominant conservative **Democratic political organization** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/byrd-organization/] headed by U.S. senator **Harry F. Byrd Sr.** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/byrd-harry-f-1887-

Harry F. Byrd

1966/], Godwin was not an insurgent. He was deeply committed to three core principles of the organization's philosophy: fiscal restraint, "pay-as-you-go" financing, and racial segregation. During his three two-year terms he sat on the Committees on the Chesapeake and its Tributaries, on Insurance and Banking, and on the less important Committee on Executive Expenditures. As a member of the House of Delegates Godwin concentrated on public education, highway safety, and environmental issues.

He resigned his seat on November 5, 1952, and won a special election later that month to fill a vacant seat in the Senate of Virginia representing the counties of Isle of Wight, Nansemond, and Southampton, and the city of Suffolk. Reelected without opposition to full terms in 1955 and 1959, Godwin served on the Committees on Courts of Justice, on Counties, Cities and Towns, on Enrolled Bills, and on Fish and Game, which he chaired during his final session in 1960. During the 1956 session he was also named to the Committee on Welfare and in the 1958 session he was named to the Committee on Finance.

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Mills E. Godwin Endorsing School Segregation
[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/mills-e-godwin-endorsing-school-segregation-2/]

Godwin played a major role in bringing about a budget compromise in 1954 between organization veterans and a group of younger members of the General Assembly called the Young Turks, who sought more funds for education and other public services. The same year the U.S.

Supreme Court handed down its decision declaring mandatory racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Reared in the Southside section of Virginia where racial mores closely resembled those of the Deep South, Godwin was adamantly opposed to school desegregation. In February 1956 he supported revival of the antebellum doctrine of interposition as a means to oppose what he considered the Supreme Court's illegal expansion of its powers. Godwin joined other Southside legislators in advocating **Massive Resistance** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/massive-resistance/] laws to obstruct implementation of the federal court's orders, including one that required the governor to close any public school under court order to desegregate. In later years Godwin refused to apologize for his role in Massive Resistance, stating that it provided time for tempers to cool. He acknowledged, however, that "we waited too long to do some of the things we should have done in earlier years to assure full equality of opportunity in education for our Negro children."

In 1961 after both state and federal courts had struck down Massive Resistance, the ambitious Godwin ran for lieutenant governor. His opponent,

Armistead L. Boothe

Armistead L. Boothe Campaigns for Lieutenant Governor

[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/boothe-armistead-l-1907-1990/], a state senator from Alexandria, denounced him as the “architect of massive resistance.” Godwin in turn called Boothe “an apostle of integration.” Godwin defeated Boothe by a vote of 187,660 to 157,176, but the margin of victory was uncharacteristically small for a Byrd Organization candidate. Godwin served as lieutenant governor and presided over sessions of the state senate from January 13, 1962, until the conclusion of his term on January 15, 1966. During those years Governor Albertis S. Harrison focused on industrial development, and in his speeches Godwin stressed that theme as well as the need for expanded state services.

The 1965 Election

Godwin intended to run for governor in 1965 and knew that he must broaden his appeal to attract voters in the burgeoning suburbs, especially in Northern Virginia. He did so by accepting an invitation in October 1964 to ride on the Virginia leg of “the Lady Bird Special,” the train the wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson rode on a

campaign trip across the South. Godwin's support for Johnson paid political dividends among suburbanites and African Americans. Many whites in the Southside, however, were outraged that Godwin had endorsed Johnson who had vigorously supported passage of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/civil-rights-act-of-1964/]. That resentment led some Southside segregationists to create the Virginia Conservative Party. Godwin projected his new moderate image as he campaigned for governor in 1965 on a platform that stressed improvements in state services with an emphasis on education. He assembled a remarkable coalition that included conservative, moderate, and liberal Democrats, African Americans, and organized labor. Defeating his Republican opponent, **A. Linwood Holton** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/holton-a-linwood-1923/], 269,526 to 212,207, Godwin failed to secure a majority of the votes as the Conservative Party candidate, William J. Story Jr., garnered more than 75,000 votes, about 13.4 percent.

Lady Bird Special Train

The Governorship: First Term (1966–1970)

Godwin entered office on January 15, 1966, with confidence, a well-defined program, and the leadership skills to bring about its enactment. Although the nation was enjoying prosperity, he knew that state revenue was not sufficient to accomplish his goals. Godwin therefore asked the General Assembly to enact a state sales tax. Various features

of the proposed levy were vigorously debated in and outside the legislature. In the end Godwin secured its enactment in spite of a provision that bound the 1968 General Assembly to raise the tax from 2 to 3 percent. The governor also obtained a separate 2 percent tax on automobile sales. Even that was not sufficient, however, and in January 1968 Godwin asked the assembly to approve the sale of $81 million in bonds to finance improvements in higher education and mental health. This marked a departure from Byrd's "pay-as-you-go" philosophy. A persuasive and accomplished orator, Godwin directed a brilliant public relations campaign to assure voter approval of the bond issue in November.

Governor Mills E. Godwin Supports State Bonds [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/governor-mills-e-godwin-supports-state-bonds-2/]

Godwin's first term produced an extraordinary record of accomplishments. This was especially true in education, earning him the sobriquet, "the education governor." At regional conferences across the state Godwin, in the words of the historian James L. Bugg Jr., preached "the gospel of educational opportunity with the zeal of a convert." During Godwin's term state appropriations for public schools increased by more than 100 percent while minimum teacher salaries improved significantly, and for the first time the state government provided funding for kindergartens and summer schools. Higher education also benefited as the colleges and universities built new campus facilities, and the

assembly established a new university in Richmond, Virginia Commonwealth University, by merging Richmond Professional Institute and the Medical College of Virginia. Godwin's greatest achievement in expanding opportunity for higher education was creation of the Virginia Community College System, which ultimately became a network of twenty-three colleges in all sections of Virginia.

The governor also persuaded the assembly to provide more money for mental health, state parks, ports, environmental protection, and public safety, all of which improved the quality of life for Virginians. Godwin continued Harrison's emphasis on economic growth. To attract investment capital and new markets for Virginia products, he employed his charm and persuasive skills at meetings with corporate executives in New York and Chicago and on two trade missions to Europe. In 1969 Godwin was responsible for the creation of a state trade office in Brussels to encourage commerce between Virginians and Europeans. Industrial investment soared, tourism increased, and businesses created new jobs.

Governor Mills E. Godwin Speaking about European Trade Efforts

Godwin also succeeded in his desire to replace the antiquated state constitution. He appointed an eleven-member commission under the chairmanship of former Governor Harrison and including the African American civil rights attorney **Oliver W. Hill** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/hill-oliver-w-1907-2007/]. Among the reforms that went into effect after the voters ratified the new constitution in November 1970 were a provision for annual rather than biennial legislative sessions and a significant increase in the state's borrowing capacity.

For the most part the civil disturbances in the late 1960s bypassed Virginia. Whether the threats to order came from the **Ku Klux Klan**

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Governor Mills E. Godwin Speaks Out Against Protesters
[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/governor-mills-e-godwin-speaks-out-against-protesters-2/]

[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/ku-klux-klan-in-virginia/], student protesters at the University of Virginia, or the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., Godwin took a firm stand. His relationship with the federal government also became increasingly contentious. Godwin was highly critical of the expansion of federal power during the 1960s. He believed that federal bureaucrats intended to limit individual freedom, regulate peoples' lives, and curtail the authority of state governments. Godwin's primary target was the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and its

guidelines on school desegregation of public colleges and universities, which he denounced as arbitrary and illegal. He was also troubled by many decisions of the Supreme Court. Among those Godwin considered judicial legislation was the Court's striking down freedom of choice school desegregation plans in a case that arose in Virginia, **Green v. County School Board of New Kent County** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/green-charles-c-et-al-v-county-school-board-of-new-kent-county-virginia/].

The broad coalition that elected Godwin did not survive. African Americans, who played a major part in his election, were disappointed that he did not appoint blacks to major posts in his administration; however, he appointed a record number of blacks to state boards and commissions. African Americans also resented his opposition to the Johnson Administration's desegregation polices and his unsuccessful effort to remove Virginia from the pre-clearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Organized labor also broke with Godwin during the bitter primary to choose his successor.

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Henry E. Howell on the 1969 Gubernatorial Democratic Primary [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/henry-e-howell-on-the-1969-gubernatorial-democratic-primary-2/]

The political environment in Virginia changed significantly late in the 1960s. Byrd died in 1966, and his political organization fell into decline. The Democratic Party divided into conservative, moderate, and liberal factions. Leading the liberals was Henry E. Howell, a populist with strong

appeal to Africans Americans and labor unions. Each faction put forward a candidate in the 1969 gubernatorial primary. Godwin remained neutral. No candidate received a majority, requiring a runoff between Howell and the moderate William C. Battle. Godwin then broke precedent by endorsing Battle in the runoff. Howell and his supporters were outraged. Although Battle defeated Howell, the bitter primaries left the nominee wounded for the fall campaign. Suffering defections from the left and right, Battle lost to Holton who became the first Republican governor of the twentieth century. A disappointed and dispirited Godwin prepared to leave office.

The Godwins were still recovering then from a personal tragedy. Unable to have children of their own, they had adopted an infant daughter, Becky, in 1954. In August 1968, while Godwin was attending the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, lightning struck his daughter at Virginia Beach and she died four days later. Becky's death left a painful void and the Godwins never returned to the house they had shared with her in Chuckatuck. They established three memorial scholarships in her name, including one at the Nansemond-Suffolk Academy.

Interregnum

After leaving the Executive Mansion on January 17, 1970, Godwin became increasingly uncomfortable with the leftward drift of the Democratic Party on both the state and national levels. In 1970 he served as campaign manager for **Harry F. Byrd Jr.** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/byrd-harry-flood-jr-1914-2013/], who had

abandoned the Democratic Party to seek reelection to the **U.S. Senate** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/members-of-the-united-states-senate-from-virginia/] as an independent. Two years later the Democrats of Godwin's home county denied him a seat at the Democratic State Convention. Unable to support the Democrats' presidential nominee, George S. McGovern, Godwin served as chairman of Virginians for Nixon, a committee established to recruit conservative Democrats and independents for the reelection of President Richard M. Nixon.

Even before the presidential election, Virginians turned their attention to the 1973 gubernatorial election. In 1971 Howell had been elected lieutenant governor after the death of the incumbent **J. Sargeant Reynolds**

This is the year for Henry Howell

[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/reynolds-j-sargeant-1936-1971/]. Howell's intention to run for governor caused conservatives to turn to Godwin as the only alternative. Godwin was receptive, but wanted to seek the office as an independent. He had forged many friendships with Democrats in both the local courthouses and the General Assembly. The resurgent Virginia Republican Party, however, was in no mood

to make life easy for Godwin. Its leaders informed him that if he ran as an independent, the Republicans would nominate a candidate, and in a three-way race Howell would be elected. Reluctantly, Godwin agreed to run on the Republican ticket.

The two candidates presented contrasting styles to the voters: Howell was colorful and folksy, and Godwin formal and courtly. Howell, stressing populist themes, appealed to voters across the ideological spectrum while Godwin, assuming a more conservative stance than in his first campaign, presented himself as a paladin of the status quo. Howell advocated repeal of the sales tax on food and nonprescription drugs and accused the state's public utility companies of charging excessive rates. Godwin maintained that Howell was a dangerous radical who would lead Virginia "down the path of ruin." The personal attacks and acrimonious tone of the campaign alienated many voters. An added problem for Godwin was damage the unfolding Watergate scandal did to the Republicans. At first, Godwin's campaign organization relied heavily on veterans of the Byrd organization, but its methods were out of touch with the changing political environment.

Howell committed two critical blunders, however, that energized Godwin's campaign. Early in October he released a private poll that showed him with a lead of more than 9 percentage points. Second, Howell announced that in addition to a new levy on dividends from corporate and bank stocks he would increase taxes on alcoholic beverages and the corporate income tax to replace the revenue lost by his planned repeal of the sales tax. Growing alarm among conservatives fueled increased contributions to

Godwin, galvanized more activity on the precinct level, and led to the intervention of the Republican National Committee in cooperation with state chairman Richard Obenshain. Targeting Howell with a series of hard-hitting attack advertisements on emotional issues such as gun control and court-ordered busing of students to create desegregated public schools, Obenshain and the national operatives also used computer technology to identify sympathetic voters to contact by telephone. In the final weeks Godwin adopted a more informal style and delivered a more positive message in his speeches. After a bitter campaign Godwin eked out a narrow victory over Howell by a vote of 525,075 to 510,103, thereby becoming the only Virginia governor elected by the people to two terms.

Henry E. Howell's Gubernatorial Campaign 1973

The Governorship: Second Term (1974–1978)

On January 12, 1974, Godwin returned to the Executive Mansion. He found a much different political environment than when he began his first term, and he was a Republican facing an overwhelmingly Democratic legislature. Most Democrats remained

on friendly terms with Godwin, but they were on their guard. As the years passed, Godwin's relationship with the General Assembly became increasingly contentious. The challenges he faced in the second term were much different than those in the first term. Instead of advocating new programs, he sought to preserve and strengthen advances made earlier. Godwin also had to cope with numerous crises. The first was in the state's antiquated corrections system. Numerous escapes as well as findings by the State Crime Commission and a special Richmond Circuit Court grand jury highlighted the problems at the state penitentiary. Godwin and the assembly instituted a number of reforms, including the creation of a separate Department of Corrections and more emphasis on rehabilitation.

Annual Tribute Ceremony

Godwin also had to deal with an energy crisis, the result of an embargo of oil by members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. Most effective among the measures he took to alleviate the gasoline shortage was the introduction of mandatory rationing in February 1974. Natural gas shortages and harsh winter weather during his term caused Godwin to issue several directives mandating conservation of natural gas and heating oil. Energy shortages contributed to the economic recession of

the 1970s. Determined to keep the budget in balance, he imposed a hiring freeze, ordered reductions in school aid and state agency budgets, and directed that capital outlay funds be transferred to the operating budget. He answered calls for badly needed new facilities at state institutions by proposing a $125 million bond issue for higher education, mental health, parks, and ports, which voters approved in 1977.

The governor had to respond to an environmental catastrophe. For nine years a chemical plant in Hopewell had been producing **Kepone**

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Kepone Environmental and Medical Disaster
[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/kepone-environmental-hazard-2/]

[https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/kepone-chlordecone/], a non-biodegradable insecticide, and depositing its highly toxic waste directly into the James River. When the effects on human health became known, in December 1975 Godwin closed the river from Richmond to the Chesapeake Bay to commercial and sport fishing and issued warnings to private fishermen. Although his second term lacked the advances of the first, Godwin succeeded in consolidating those gains while maintaining a balanced budget. He also appointed Virginia's first African American circuit judge in 1974. Godwin's second term as governor concluded on January 14, 1978.

Later Years

In retirement the Godwins lived in their new home on the Nansemond River. The former governor served on numerous corporate boards, and he remained involved in politics, supporting Republican candidates with varying degrees of enthusiasm. In 1981 critics attacked Godwin for making what they regarded as racially charged comments in a speech on behalf of Republican gubernatorial candidate J. Marshall Coleman. Godwin had censured Democratic candidate **Charles S. Robb** [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/robb-charles-s-1939/] for supporting a number of issues important to African Americans. In 1995 the former governor remained true to his doctrine of fiscal conservatism by explicitly opposing fellow Republican governor George F. Allen who proposed budget cuts for higher education and implicitly opposing Allen's plan for a large tax cut. Godwin also chided both parties' gubernatorial candidates in 1997 for their opposition to tax increases.

Weakened by Parkinson's disease, Godwin retreated from the political scene thereafter. Godwin died of pneumonia on January 30, 1999, shortly after checking out of a Newport News hospital, and was buried in Cedar Hill Cemetery in Suffolk.

EXTERNAL LINKS

Sources consulted by the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*

[http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/dvb/sources.asp?b=Godwin_Mills_Edwin_1914-1999]

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MAP

TIMELINE

November 19, 1914

Mills E. Godwin is born on the family farm in Nansemond County.

1931

Mills E. Godwin graduates from Chuckatuck High School. He goes on to attend the College of William and Mary, first in Norfolk and then in Williamsburg.

June 10, 1940

Mills E. Godwin graduates from the University of Virginia School of Law.

October 26, 1940

Mills E. Godwin and Katherine T. Beale, of Chuckatuck, marry.

1943

Mills E. Godwin is appointed a special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

November 4, 1947

Mills E. Godwin is elected as a Democrat to the House of Delegates.

November 5, 1952

Mills E. Godwin resigns his seat in the House of Delegates and later in the month wins special election to the Senate of Virginia.

1956—1958

State Senator Mills E. Godwin is a vocal advocate of the Massive Resistance laws designed to prevent court-ordered desegregation of schools.

November 7, 1961

Mills E. Godwin, a Democrat, is elected lieutenant governor of Virginia.

1964

Mills E. Godwin campaigns in Virginia with the first lady, Lady Bird Johnson, in support of the election of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

November 2, 1965

Mills E. Godwin, a Democrat, defeats the Republican A. Linwood Holton in a three-way race for governor of Virginia. The Virginia Conservative Party candidate William J. Story finishes third.

1966

Governor Mills E. Godwin obtains passage of a sales tax and major increases in funding for education from kindergarten to university including the creation of a community college system.

December 7, 1966

Governor Mills E. Godwin officially condemns the Ku Klux Klan and singles out cross-burning as a "reprehensible" act "long associated with the record of bigotry compiled by the Ku Klux Klan."

1968

Governor Mills E. Godwin leads the successful effort to pass Virginia's first general obligation bond issue to be dedicated to the capital needs of higher education and mental health.

January 26, 1968

Governor Mills E. Godwin appoints the Commission on Constitutional Revision, which will author the Constitution of 1971.

August 29, 1968

Becky Godwin, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Governor Mills E. Godwin and Katherine B. Godwin, dies after being struck by lightning four days earlier at Virginia Beach.

1969

Breaking precedent for a sitting governor, Mills E. Godwin endorses a candidate, William C. Battle, in the Democratic gubernatorial run-off primary.

1972

Mills E. Godwin, a Democrat, serves as chairman of Virginians for Nixon, a committee created to recruit conservatives and independents for the reelection of President Richard M. Nixon, a Republican.

November 6, 1973

Former governor Mills E. Godwin, a Byrd Democrat, switches parties and wins election as Virginia's second consecutive Republican governor. He defeats Henry E. Howell Jr.

February 1974

Mills E. Godwin establishes mandatory gasoline rationing during the Arab oil embargo.

December 1975

Governor Mills E. Godwin addresses the environmental crisis caused by the dumping of the toxic insecticide Kepone into the James River by closing the river and its tributaries to commercial and sport fishing.

1977

Governor Mills E. Godwin secures legislative and voter approval of a $125 million bond issue for higher education, mental health, ports, and parks.

1981

Mills E. Godwin makes a controversial speech supporting Republican gubernatorial candidate J. Marshall Coleman and criticizing Democratic nominee Charles S. Robb for positions he had taken on issues of importance to African Americans.

1995

Former governors Mills E. Godwin, A. Linwood Holton, and Gerald Baliles write a letter to General Assembly members urging them to oppose Governor George F. Allen's proposed budget reductions to higher education.

1998

Mills E. Godwin makes his final public appearance at the dedication of the Mills E. Godwin Jr. Courts Building in Suffolk.

January 30, 1999

Mills E. Godwin dies of pneumonia in Newport News. He is buried in Cedar Hill Cemetery in Suffolk.

FURTHER READING

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